

Eric Alterman: Opening Statement for Media Bias Forum, Congressman John Conyers, Jr., Ranking Member, U.S. House Judiciary Committee, FROM THE NEWSWEEK CONTROVERSY TO THE DOWNING STREET MEMO, CONYERS HOSTS FORUM: "MEDIA BIAS AND THE FUTURE OF FREEDOM OF THE PRESS"  
"Working the Refs," By Eric Alterman

For the past five decades, Republican politicians, writers, television pundits and think tanks have been remarkably successful at convincing the American people of a "liberal bias" in the media. Using the very same media outlets that they complain don't give their cause a fair shake to lodge their complaints, they know that slamming the other side is little more than way to get their own ideas across, while drowning out opposing voices. Some have even admitted as much. During the 1992 presidential race, Rich Bond, then chair of the Republican Party, outlined the Right's game plan, saying that "There is some strategy to it [bashing the 'liberal' media]. If you watch any great coach, what they try to do is 'work the refs.' Maybe the ref will cut you a little slack on the next one."

Even William Kristol, undoubtedly the most influential Republican/neoconservative writer and publisher in America today, is on record as saying that the "liberal media" canard is often used by conservatives as an excuse to cover up for conservative failures. Despite this, Kristol's magazine, The Weekly Standard, joins its colleagues on the conservative media in trotting out the liberal bias canard virtually every chance it gets.

Looking at the media on a case by case basis, the conservative claims about liberal bias completely fall apart. Newspapers for example, so often the brunt of the Right's criticism, are hardly lacking for conservative voices. In fact, conservatives own outright some of the country's largest newspapers - or at least their editorial pages. The Washington Times, the New York Post, and the New York Sun are all unabashedly conservative, while the influential Wall Street Journal's editorial page, recently graced with its own PBS program including a \$5 million taxpayer subsidy, is populated by some of the most rabidly far-right columnists working in this country today.

And the equivalent of this on the left? Some would point to the New York Times, which counts two conservatives, David Brooks and John Tierney on its page, and which until recently ran a column by William Safire. How about another Right wing whipping boy - the Washington Post? They run columns by George Will, Robert Kagan and Charles Krauthammer. Hardly writers who sympathize with liberal values. The Wall Street Journal, New York Post, and Washington Times can't say that they have anything remotely comparable to the diversity of opinion that can be found on the pages of the allegedly "liberal" New York Times and Washington Post. In the magazine world two of the Right's favorite targets -- Time and Newsweek - run columns by Krauthammer and Will, respectively. Speaking of magazines, there is certainly no dearth of conservative titles to choose from, with selections including Pat Buchanan's The American Conservative, Kristol's the Weekly Standard, The American Spectator, National Review, Commentary, etc., etc.

On the cable news networks and Sunday shout fests where conservatives love to pull the "liberal bias" charge out of their bags when confronted with facts they don't like, you would be hard pressed to much liberal representation. It's odd that of most prominent liberals writing in the nation's newspapers and opinion magazines-- E.J. Dionne, Robert Kuttner, Paul Krugman,

Hendrik Hertzberg, Molly Ivins -- not one has ever been given a regular slot on television; like say, Bob Novak, Fred Barnes, Tucker Carlson, Sean Hannity, Tony Blankley, Pat Buchanan, Bill O'Reilly or Brit Hume. Even PBS of late is populated more journalists of the extreme right than of the moderate left. Indeed, one is hard-pressed to come up with a single journalist or pundit appearing on television who is even remotely as far to the left of the mainstream spectrum as most of these conservatives are to the right. Indeed, if the current leadership of the Corporation for Public Broadcasting gets its way, PBS will one day be difficult to distinguish from Fox News or even Sinclair Broadcasting.

And yet, conservatives complain about the "liberal media" from within the confines of their own ideological media empires. In other words, the right is most defiantly working the refs. And it's working. Much of the public believes the myth about the so-called liberal media, and the media themselves have been cowed by conservatives into repeating this lie virtually nonstop - lest they too be branded "liberal." The pundits who are given so much air time and ink to cry foul about their lack of representation are the very same ones who are pulling this massive bait-and-switch on a public that apparently doesn't see the irony of someone on television complaining that his side isn't being heard.

Meanwhile, the non-Right wing media must, on a daily basis, come face to face with an administration obsessed with secrecy, and which belittles and browbeats reporters at every opportunity. Note how quickly Scott McClennan blamed Newsweek for the rioting in Afghanistan last week. Despite the fact that his bosses presided over the invasion of Iraq and the well-documented abuses at Abu Ghraib and Bagram, the administration - along with a whole host of ready-for-prime-time conservative talking heads - pounced on one sentence in a short blurb, claiming that it caused irreparable harm to the "image of America" in the Muslim world.

But this has become par for the course. Conservative media outlets long for moments such as these, pouncing on any journalist who falls out of lockstep with their rigid ideological framework. In other words, they attack what in previous generations had been known as honest journalism, by throwing up the discredited but nevertheless effective accusation of "liberal bias" in order to protect their ideological fellow travelers from scrutiny.

In the end, this phony "liberal media" accusation is just one of many tools in the conservative arsenal. They are, as former RNC chair Rich Bond has admitted, "working the refs" and it works. Thanks to their tireless efforts, the American people have lost faith in a cowed media who finds itself constantly trying to deflect charges that have no basis in reality.

Alterman bio: Termed "the most honest and incisive media critic writing today" in the National Catholic Reporter, and author of "the smartest and funniest political journal out there," in The San Francisco Chronicle, Eric Alterman is Professor of English at Brooklyn College of the City University of New York, the "Liberal Media" columnist for The Nation, the "Altercation" weblogger for MSNBC.com ([www.altercation.msnbc.com](http://www.altercation.msnbc.com)), and a senior fellow at the Center for American Progress, where he writes and edits the "Think Again" column. Alterman is the author of the national bestsellers, *What Liberal Media? The Truth About Bias and the News* (2003,2004), and *The Book on Bush: How George W. (Mis)leads America* (with Mark Green, 2004). His newest book is *When Presidents Lie: A History of Official Deception* and its

Consequences, (2004). His *Sound & Fury: The Making of the Punditocracy* (1992, 2000), won the 1992 George Orwell Award and his *It Ain't No Sin to be Glad You're Alive: The Promise of Bruce Springsteen* (1999, 2001), won the 1999 Stephen Crane Literary Award. Alterman is also the author of *Who Speaks for America? Why Democracy Matters in Foreign Policy*, (1998). A frequent lecturer and contributor to virtually every significant national publication in the US and many in Europe, in recent years, he has also been a columnist for: *Worth*, *Rolling Stone*, *Mother Jones*, and *The Sunday Express* (London). A senior fellow of the World Policy Institute at New School University, and former Adjunct Professor of Journalism at NYU and Columbia, Alterman received his B.A. in History and Government from Cornell, his M.A. in International Relations from Yale, and his Ph.D. in US History from Stanford. He lives with his family in Manhattan where he is at work on a history of postwar American liberalism.